BRISTOL WARREN REGIONAL SCHOOL COMMITTEE

SPECIAL MEETING / PUBLIC HEARING

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 17, 2007

A special meeting / public hearing of the Bristol Warren Regional

School Committee was held on Wednesday, October 17, 2007, in the

Auditorium of Mt. Hope High School, 199 Chestnut Street, Bristol, Rl.

William A. Estrella, Jr., Chairperson, called the meeting to order at

approximately 7:05 p.m.

Present: William A. Estrella, Jr., Marjorie J. McBride, Paul Silva,

William M. O'Dell, Paul E. Brule, Diana B. Campbell, David L. Dugan,

Karen A. Lynch and John P. Saviano; Edward P. Mara, Ed.D.,

Superintendent of Schools: Melinda L. Thies, Assistant

Superintendent for Secondary Curriculum, Assessment

Instruction; Mary Cerullo, Executive Director of Literacy K-12,

Elementary Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment; Jane F. Correia,

Director of Administration and Finance; and Andrew D. Henneous,

Esq., District Solicitor

Absent: none

BUDGET/FACILITIES SUBCOMMITTEE RECOMMENDATION

Recommendation #BF2007-09: That the School Committee, upon the recommendation of the Budget/Facilities Subcommittee, decommission the Byfield and Reynolds buildings according to the Superintendent's schedule.

Mr. O'Dell motioned to receive into the file recommendation #BF2007-09. Mrs. McBride seconded. The motion passed unanimously.

PHASE II ELEMENTARY FACILITIES TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATION

Recommendation #EF2007-01 (from the minutes of September 24 meeting) The subcommittee voted 3:1; it was approved that the Subcommittee Task Force would recommend to the full school committee that they NOT vote on October 9th (regarding the closing of Byfield and Reynolds at the same time to give more time for consideration).

Mrs. Lynch motioned to put the recommendation on the table. Mrs. McBride seconded.

Mrs. Lynch explained that the Subcommittee felt, after listening to very hot discussions, that there were many questions left to be answered and we were moving way too fast. Mrs. Lynch corrected her motion to: "accept the recommendation." Mrs. McBride did not second. Mr. Silva seconded but wanted to assure clarification. Attorney Henneous advised the wording be: "receive into the file the recommendation of the Task Force." Mrs. Lynch confirmed. Mrs. McBride seconded. The motion passed unanimously.

SUPERINTENDENT'S RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation #S2007-37: That the School Committee, upon the recommendation of the Superintendent, decommission the Main Street School building on July 31, 2008; the Byfield School building on July 31, 2008; and the Reynolds School building on July 31, 2009.

Mr. Silva motioned to approve; Mr. Dugan seconded for the purpose of discussion.

Mr. O'Dell moved to amend the recommendation as follows: decommission the Main Street School building on July 31, 2008, the Byfield School building on September 30, 2008 and the Reynolds School building on September 30, 2008. Mrs. McBride seconded the motion to amend.

Comments

Mr. O'Dell: Expressed appreciation for Dr. Mara's plans, both of which have good and negative points; he prefers the first plan

because it creates better student equity and for budgetary reasons. He selected September 30 for closing the buildings to give the custodial and maintenance staff time to empty the buildings and get them ready to turn over to the Town.

Mrs. McBride: No comment at this time.

Mrs. Campbell:

"I want to thank Dr. Mara and his team for his work in coming up with this proposal. I heartily agree with his ultimate goal, to continue the Arts Magnet Program while expanding it and its philosophy to other children and to other disciplines like Technology and Science.

I do, however, have a few concerns that I think we need to consider as we weigh the closing of this building.

First, keeping the Reynolds School open for an extra year will mean having two buildings sharing a principal. I did not think that this was a good idea during the budget discussions of the spring and I don't think it's a good idea now. The hiring of an assistant was also discussed in the spring, and there were many good reasons why we didn't go that route. I still agree with those reasons.

Second, I don't like the idea of keeping such an excellent Education model dangling just beyond the reach of the students of the Downtown district like Tantalus' water. Even if the program is implemented in some form, as part of a transition year, it is still not going to be the same. The teachers who are new to the program would benefit far more from working side-by-side with the veteran

teachers than from trying to glean that knowledge from them only during professional development times.

Third, I've received many letters from parents telling me that this shouldn't be about the money. I TOTALLY agree with them. And if I had an unlimited budget, I might be taking a different stand tonight — and we might be able to afford 2 principals! Unfortunately, it is about the money. Even in your own families, you know that sometimes you have to make unpopular decisions based on money — vacationing in NH instead of Hawaii, for example.

There is the very real possibility that we will be faced with some drastic budget cuts next year. I feel that it is far better for us to anticipate these cuts, to plan for them, to be proactive instead of reactive, than it will be for us to scramble next May when our budgets are cut out from under us by the Joint Finance Committee. If we go along with the thought that we will have the budget we need to keep this building open and then the joint Finance cuts our budget — we will either have to make an even hastier decision to close the building than we are now, or we will have to make deep cuts in programming and staffing. I think it is MORE RESPONSIBLE of us to make these hard decisions now when we can plan for them than later when we're doing what we are often criticized for doing — being REACTIVE, instead of PRO-active."

Mrs. Lynch:

"We asked Dr. Mara to do a job. That job was to come up with a recommendation of what to do with the children in both the Byfield

and the Reynolds School once Colt Andrews opens, theoretically in September 2008. Our chairman told the parents that we would give them the opportunity to voice their concerns so that Dr. Mara could be given the opportunity to take their concerns into consideration before making his final recommendation. Several parents and teachers voiced their concerns regarding the 1st recommendation and made it pretty clear there were some serious holes in the first plan. Dr. Mara did his job, he listened to the parents and to the teachers and revised his recommendation to do what he thought was in the best interest of both the program and the kids.

Now this committee is voting to overthrow his recommendation and close all three buildings anyway. They are voting against the recommendation of the Superintendent who many on this committee have stated publicly over and over again is paid to make these kinds of decision because they deal with the educational future of this district. Yes, the population has decreased by 41 students since the first bond passed, but I am building a new house in a new development of 14 houses in Bristol right now, there is a Low Income Housing development in Bristol that is just breaking ground that will have 18 units most likely containing young families with children and even a new development across from Rockwell school which contains seven lots to be developed into single family homes. We are voting to close two buildings that house children with both Rockwell and Guiteras practically filled to capacity and in turn maxing out every classroom in Bristol and that is even before the possibility of 29 new families enters the district with more children. As of now, all the

above 29 homes are in the Rockwell School District which is already full to capacity. Am I the only person who feels we need to stop and figure out where these children are going to go to school before voting to close both Byfield and Reynolds? Yes, we can shrink the Rockwell neighborhood lines but then the overflow will go the Guiteras who is also close to capacity. Then we will need to shrink the Guiteras lines and that overflow will end up filling up even more seats in Colt Andrews. Again leaving less and less spaces for the Arts Magnet Program to be accessible to other students in the community. All these questions need to be answered before we vote to close these buildings. It is irresponsible to close all the buildings without having a real plan in place. That plan can not include maxing out all the classrooms in Bristol and forcing a new school down the taxpayers' throats because we are out of space. The taxpayers made it perfectly clear that they will not support a new school and will not be happy when tell them they have no choice.

All I hear about is fiscal responsibility but the numbers given at the last meeting of \$150,000 to keep that building open for 1 more year is not completely accurate. According to these numbers, it assumes \$60,000 worth of electrical work would need to be done next year at Reynolds. Bob Pugh our Director of Facilities stated that the work that would need to be done to get through the next year shouldn't cost more than \$3,000. There is a \$26,000 undisputed utilities charge and the cost of the difference between an Arts Magnet Coordinator position with a salary of approximately \$40,000 a year and an assistant principal to be located at Reynolds at the cost of

approximately \$75,000 a year. The difference in those positions being approximately \$34,000 a year. The total now becomes \$66,000 a year and not \$150,000 a year. In a \$51,000,000 budget, \$34,000 is a drop in the bucket. We just paid \$150,000 to move the technology department over to the middle school to be able to close Main Street School in June. We just spent \$100,000 for a new science lab at the high school. We just spent \$150,000 to repave the parking lots at the high school. We are spending money for four teachers at Hugh Cole for 64 students in the 2nd grade. That is two classes of 15 and two classes of 17. Last, but not least we have already approved \$15,000 in cost over runs for the Colt Andrews Project with more to come since more asbestos was found in Colt than was originally expected and that project just broke ground three weeks ago. Everyone on this committee has publicly stated they support the Arts Magnet Program and wants to see it grow and be available to more children throughout the district.

In the past, I have sat before many members of this committee as a parent of two children in Reynolds School and demanded that work be done to that building to make it safe for my children. I lobbied and supported a bond that would provide a new school so that all the children in Reynolds could get out of that substandard, unsafe environment and get into a new school. I attended more meetings than I can count, wrote more letters to the Editor, to the school committee and the Town Council than I care to remember. I did all this because every elementary child in this district deserves to be in school like Rockwell, Guiteras and the new Hugh Cole School. But,

when bonds failed and this school committee chose to put forward a bond that left out both the Byfield and Reynolds communities, I along with most parents in the Arts Magnet Program had a choice to make. We could keep our children in that substandard building or we could pull our children out of the program and put them back into their neighborhood school. I along with most Arts Magnet parents chose to keep our children in the program despite the conditions of the building. We believed in the program, we believed in the teachers, we believed in the benefits of this type of education for our children. These parents have told this committee they will gladly stay in that building one more year to insure that the program is expanded properly. They are not asking for two years, three years or ten years, just one year to let this administration do what it needs to do expand this program the right way to ensure the future of the Arts Magnet Program and the new program at Hugh Cole so that many more children will have access to these programs in the future."

Mr. O'Dell stated that the Arts Magnet Program was a gem in this district that it is our job to find the right setting for this gem that we have. By voting to close both of these buildings, this committee will not only be leaving the Arts Magnet Program with out a setting but will take away the admittedly substandard setting they currently occupy. As a builder, you don't buy a set of house plans without making sure you have a lot the right size in which to build and as a school committee we should not be closing schools against the recommendation of the superintendent and without an approved plan in place for what will happen to all of the children in the Arts Magnet

Program, what will happen to the future of that program and how that program will grow to include all of the Byfield population. We truly are putting the cart before the horse and nobody can seem to figure out why. We owe it to the parents at both Reynolds and Byfield, the teachers in both communities and the future of this district to make sure we expand this program without sacrificing its future. We owe Dr. Mara our support in making a recommendation he feels will best insure the future of this program as it expands, and will put all of Byfield into Colt Andrews once it is finished and will create a new program at Hugh Cole that will put the Bristol Warren Regional School District on the cutting edge of education in this State. Mostly we owe it to the voters of Bristol and Warren. We will be asking for a new bond knowing the community is growing. Take all these issues into account before we vote tonight."

Mrs. Kristen Quinn, Reynolds parent: The eventual closing of Byfield and Reynolds has been public knowledge; lumping the Byfield and Reynolds kids together was not out until recently; if that was always intended, the renovations would have been designed differently. Overcrowding is already a problem at Guiteras and Rockwell; a Magnet program in Warren would alleviate the overcrowding problem in Bristol, it will fill out the empty classrooms at Hugh Cole and will allow the Bristol and Warren populations to come together with ease. Kindergarten registration is five months away—this is not enough time to develop a program at Hugh Cole and market it to the public.

Mrs. Quinn urged the Committee to look at the big picture, do what is right for all the children in the District and vote to approve the Superintendent's recommendation as originally stated, not as amended by Mr. O'Dell.

Mrs. Maria Serbst, Byfield parent:

"As with so many of you, I have sat through most of these meetings with anticipation for a brighter future for all our children.

It is apparent that we are not all going to be satisfied with the outcome. However, I can only hope that we continue to put our own personal feelings aside and think of days ahead.

Remember we are our children's most important teachers-they learn from us first. Life's experiences are what shapes us all. If given a strong foundation our children's minds will know no limits. Each one of them is still a unique individual and must be taught as such.

It is my belief in having our schools coming together, we will be able to keep our children in a safer and healthier environment and we will join forces to create a program that will work for all involved.

They need direction and here we are trying to come together to give them that. After all, it is not so much what we want but what we need. So let's give it our best shot because they are so worth it and they simply deserve it."

Mrs. Susan Rancourt, Reynolds PTO President: No matter what

happens, she feels this is the end of an era; one path is politics as usual and leads to disappointment, disillusionment and antagonism; the second path is long-term planning. She cautioned the Committee that once they cast their vote, there is no going back on it; it would be bad judgment to close the buildings right away; Arts Magnet at Colt Andrews would make the program less accessible to other children in the District; Bristol schools will be maxed out; a lottery is the only equitable selection process; out of 167 children on the wait list, 30 are Byfield; part of the success of the program is due to the fact there is a choice; there will be objections to any program. You run the risk of diluting the program beyond recognition when you combine the elements of various programs. We cannot play favorites, either equal opportunity or no access. Families on the Arts Magnet wait list should be included in the growth. We need to develop a good action plan to implement the programs; if we are unsure, there is less harm in waiting; she would like the success of the Arts Magnet Program to continue and to grow. Their intention was never to begrudge Byfield families what was promised to them. She is optimistic the Committee will choose the right path and asked them to approve the best program for the children, not the cheapest.

Ms. Gina Macdonald: When Reynolds first became Arts Magnet, it was the only high performing school; it is terrific the other elementary schools have improved their performance substantially. When the bond passed and the decision was made to turn Colt Andrews into a

three-track school there was no need for a new school and planning could have begun at that time. District enrollment since 1992 has gone down 14%; it is not clear why there is concern over a growing population despite 20 to 30 new houses. As much as she hates to see us abandon Byfield and Reynolds, the prudent thing to do is just that; perhaps Bristol could hold one in abeyance for a year or two. She asked why the District did not plan ahead and benchmark.

Mr. Joseph DePasquale, Reynolds parent: Closing Byfield seems logical; if Roger Williams is interested in Reynolds, why not ask them to fund the infrastructure repairs in advance, to buy time to coordinate a plan and make all the numbers fit. If this recommendation passes, the second recommendation is moot.

Mr. Estrella reminded Mr. DePasquale that the District does not own any of the buildings, and a deal would have to be between the Town of Bristol and the other entity; we do not have the authority to negotiate. Cost estimates by administration to bring Reynolds up to code are \$475,000.

Stacie O.Willetts, Reynolds parent:

"I have three children at the Reynolds Arts Magnet School.

I would like to take a moment to clarify the term Magnet that is used

in our school name. The fact is that the term magnet is a "METAPHOR". A magnet school was actually intended to "ATTRACT" students from across different school zones. It was intended that the environment and the experience would attract families to cross school zones by choice. The original goal of a Magnet school was to voluntarily help with diversity and reduce racial isolation.

Sending the 76 children back to Warren is a contradiction to the reason why Magnet schools were EVER created. It is not in ANY child's best interest to be displaced from the Arts Magnet Program; especially when they have been with my children now for 5 years. Though children are resilient, your decisions should be made by what is BEST for ALL the children in the ENTIRE district, no matter what NEIGHBORHOOD or TOWN they live in. Our children, without debate, should be able to continue to have the arts as an essential part of their education.

With this said, I ask that we continue to be patient and give the Arts Magnet teachers and their colleagues an opportunity to share their knowledge with us and guide us through the upcoming transitions, such as, the possibility of creating a new magnet school in Warren and the importance of keeping the Arts Magnet Program intact.

In conclusion, I believe with great thought we will find a solution on how to begin one program and preserve another. Please vote on the most beneficial proposal and NOT the most convenient. The Arts Magnet School IS successful and should be expanded to ALL, who have a love for the visual and performing arts. Our program is strong and creative, as well as, our educators; unique. I will remain

optimistic, although this can be challenging at times, as we wait to hear the LONG TERM GOALS for our children. Please vote on what is best NOT for SOME OF, but ALL of our children, our teachers and the Arts Magnet Program."

Mr. Joseph DePasquale: As a point of order he believes the school district would fund improvement needed for the building. Mr. Estrella concurred that the District would be responsible if we continue to use the building.

Mr. Jim Casalegno: He attended the finance meeting where the cost of keeping Reynolds open one year was discussed and utilities would cost \$35,000 and improvements are not needed to keep the building open for only one year; if the District turns the buildings over to the town, the utilities have to be kept running and either way, the taxpayers have to pay—there is no financial benefit there.

Mrs. Dona Paull, Arts Magnet teacher: The program should be kept in tact and as a choice; large class sizes are devastating, as testing and assessments are done on a continuous basis, and 24 students in a class will impair the ability to maintain goals; and at the third and fourth grade levels, 24 students don't fit in the classrooms well; maximum class size will limit space for materials, there will be more children making less gains and scores will go down. With another

magnet program in Warren, Bristol would not be maxed out. The cost of housing in Bristol is higher than on Aquidneck Island. Do not destroy the gains that every teacher in Bristol has made; raising the teacher to student ratio is a big mistake.

Mr. Estrella pointed out that none of these plans decrease the number of teachers.

Mr. Joseph Costa of Kathleen Drive in Warren: Shocked at the small number of people present; feels the Magnet Program is good and wonderful no matter where it is, however, it is not a good thing when a program is funded one year and not the next. He has concerns about empty buildings; he asked if Dr. Mara is being pressured into closing buildings; we should not rush; and doesn't Roger Williams have enough?

Mr. Estrella asked for a roll call vote.

Mr. Estrella: Quoted John F. Kennedy in regards to cherishing our children's future; in Warren we had to establish a system that makes every child safe; ten years ago, there were padlocks and chains on the doors of some of the Bristol buildings when people were in them

and they didn't meet building and environmental codes. We and many others have spent time making sure the kids are in safe buildings. Programs are the responsibility of administration and professional educators; whatever is decided tonight, we have months to get the program plan together; we have the ability to get all kids into safe, code-compliant buildings by September 2008. We are not talking about doing away with any programs. He worries more about the student's health and safety. A plan to make all kids safe and retain the Arts Magnet Program can be developed in ten months, just as well as it can in two years. He will approve the amendment.

Mr. Dugan: "From the short time I have been a school board member, no issue has risen to the importance of the one we are about to vote on tonight and it is for this reason I have chosen to prepare written remarks.

At the outset I wish to commend the parents of Byfield and Reynolds for their time, energy, enthusiasm and commitment in providing this committee with their thoughts. We are most appreciative. When this issue presented itself it was my hope to accomplish several objectives.

First, I wanted to remove the Byfield children to a first rate facility, one they richly deserve.

Secondly, I felt it imperative we continue with the Arts Magnet Program which has been very successful and has the support of parents, children and faculty. Thirdly, I have felt all along the need to work toward a goal of instituting a science-technology magnet program. Anyone who has read Thomas Friedman's book "The World is Flat" knows the importance of preparing our children to live and work in the 21st century. It is not an option to do anything less.

For the reasons just articulated I plan to do what I believe to be in the best long-range interest of our school district and vote against the amendment."

Mr. Saviano: The Committee has many things to consider; some people will be winners, some losers, and we are trying to make the difference between winning and losing so close we won't ever remember these discussions. Our concerns are first for the children, then the taxpayer; no board member is not totally committed. We get money from the towns for being fiduciarily proper; this coming year we will be getting less and have much more to pay to the State for the staff retirement plan; the money has to come from the closing of schools. The kids are not in the safest environment they can be in and we cannot spend the money it will take to keep these schools open. We would like to please everyone, but we can't; we love every child in every school; parents must understand we cannot always give what you would like, we give what we can. Mr. Saviano will vote for the amendment.

Mr. Brule: He does not know if Dr. Mara will be here in 2009 and there could be five new Committee members next year and we have to look for \$500,000 next year before we even start the budget; last year we were cut \$1M. He does not want to cut teachers and programs to keep a school open, but that is what will happen; only a few classrooms will have 24 students, not all. The Warren Arts Magnet students are not going back to Warren next year; we may ask the Kindergarten class. We spent a lot of money in the high school labs and in our buildings, because we needed to—the buildings must be maintained. Repairs of \$3,000 could become \$10,000; oil prices are going up; we are hoping for the same amount of funding from the State. There is a contingency fund for the Colt Andrews construction project of \$700,000 which is available for unexpected things that always come up during renovations. Mr. Brule is in favor of closing the schools for budgetary reasons. Money is going to be very tight next year and the whole town is going to feel the crunch. He always has the kids at heart, but wants a better school system than he had. Arts Magnet is a beautiful program; he would like to see all the schools do it; in ten months there will be one at Hugh Cole, the Superintendent will make it work. He is in favor of the amendment.

Mrs. Campbell: Transitions are difficult; next year will be a transition no matter what we decide to do; keeping the building open another year will extend the transition for two years. How we deal with this transition is what our children will see; she would like the Committee to come together to make it work, and it will. Another year will not make a difference; she is in favor of the amendment.

Mr. O'Dell: Outside of the meetings, parents have expressed alternate views of what was expressed tonight. Regarding comments from parents he stated, "You have me squirming, you have good arguments." He said this is like a plane taking off on the runway—it is going very fast, but after the mania of takeoff and it is in the air, you have a long flight, you have time. We have six weeks less than one year to get this done; if the vote does not go his way he is going to hit the ground running tomorrow to make this thing work; he is more concerned about tomorrow that tonight; we need to come together and make this work or it will fail. He is voting in favor of the amendment for the sake of the kids.

Mrs. Lynch: Commented that children cannot be forced to go across town lines. She remarked that none of us would be sitting here if Mrs. Macdonald and the Save Our Schools group hadn't put together a campaign to destroy the best bond referendum any of us have ever seen; now we are forced to make these decisions. Mrs. Lynch feels we are rushing way too fast; she is very uncomfortable about overturning Dr. Mara's recommendation because we pay him to do what is in the best interest of the children. She has an additional recommendation which she submitted to Dr. Mara; she hopes the

Committee will look at this proposal, do what is best for the children, and increase the Arts Magnet program and allow the community to come together. She votes no.

Mr. Silva: Stated he was accused of being disingenuous and when we voted on the last bond we should have known this; the 2004 proposal's phase II deals with the closure of additional schools; our plans have not changed overnight. In 13 years he has not ever spent so much time going over goals, with a push from Mrs. Campbell, which include maintaining facilities. A task force was established that wasn't allowed to perform its task. Dr. Mara's recommendation was changed; Mr. Silva questions if someone on the committee directed this. The School Committee deals with buildings which will affect Dr. Mara's educational plans. Dr. Mara is not asking for the buildings to remain open forever; \$32,000 to keep the building open one year is .5% of a \$51M budget. Mr. Silva pointed out some fiscal decisions made by the Committee, also it is OK to have extra room at Hugh Cole, but this is an issue in Bristol. Dr. Mara's revised proposal is educationally sound; we will not see fruition if we close a building. **Subcommittee** recommended "according to The Budget Superintendent's schedule"; we are now voting it down; the Task Force voted to slow down; the Committee is not listening to any of them. Some of the Committee has slight misconceptions. To Mr. Brule he rebutted that if the 76 Warren students are allowed to stay in Bristol, there will be 17 too many kids. \$35,000 will give educators an

extra year to come up with a plan. In regards to Mr. O'Dell's analogy, he feels we are asking the Superintendent to get our staff and kids to a different location when the Committee controls the play and not giving him a plane to fly them in. Mr. Silva's vote is no to the amendment.

Mrs. McBride: Has spoken comfortably about this issue; she will vote yes to the amendment.

The vote on the amendment passed 6 to 3.

The vote on the recommendation as amended carries by a vote of 6 to 3 with Mr. Dugan, Mrs. Lynch and Mr. Silva voting no.

The Chair instructed the Superintendent to notify the Town Councils of each town of tonight's actions.

Recommendation #S2007-38: That the School Committee, upon the recommendation of the Superintendent, approve the revised elementary program change for September 2008 and September 2009, as documented in the revised plan presented on October 9, 2007.

Mr. Estrella announced that since this recommendation hinged on the outcome of #2007-37, he asked Dr. Mara to withdraw this recommendation, discuss it with Administration, and make a revised recommendation to the Committee. Dr. Mara will do this.

Meeting Updates

Mr. Estrella said the next School Committee meeting will be in the high school auditorium. The Head Start Program, formerly housed at Liberty Street School, will be housed at Mary V. Quirk; there is an open house on November 5 at 10:30 AM. He reminded the Committee to report points of concern with the teachers' contract. The Budget Subcommittee meeting scheduled for Thursday is cancelled.

ADJOURNMENT – 9:08 PM

There being no further business to discuss, Mrs. McBride, seconded by Mr. Brule, motioned to adjourn at 9:05 PM. The motion passed unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,

Paul Silva, Secretary

/c